

**Interview with Dr. Robert Hawkes
conducted by Linda Byrne for the
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective**

July 31, 2007

Linda: I am here this afternoon with Dr. Robert Hawkes and it is July 31, 2007, Tuesday afternoon and we are going to conduct this interview for the purposes of a look back at the Providence District history, which is being done by Supervisor Linda Smyth's office. Dr. Hawkes would you start this interview by introducing and speaking about yourself.

Dr. Hawkes: Thank you, delighted to be here. I am Robert Hawkes and I am a native, lifelong Virginian. I grew up on the Southside of Virginia in Nottoway County and I had the privilege in 1969 to come to George Mason College of the University of Virginia. I have been a proud Northern Virginian and Fairfax resident since 1969. A year ago I retired after 37 years at the George Mason University. So I have seen a lot of change in Northern Virginia and I have seen George Mason go from a very small branch of the University of Virginia to the largest University in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Linda: That is wonderful. Where did you go to school Dr. Hawkes?

Dr. Hawkes: I did my undergraduate at Randolph Macon College where we had 500 students and coming from a high school of 200, I could not imagine a school being so large. I had a high school a graduating class of 30. I went to Randolph Macon. My most interesting Professor my first year was my history professor, Dr. Oliver, so I majored in history and then went on to the University of Virginia and earned my MA and PHD degrees in US History, US Southern History, Colonial America and Virginia History.

Linda: Can you please tell me your fondest memory of living in Fairfax County?

Dr. Hawkes: That is a tough question. I have loved living here I think it has probably been the diversity of the region and the many different types of people, who constantly energized, challenged and inspired my thinking.

Linda: When did you move to Northern Virginia?

Dr. Hawkes: In 1969. Fairfax was still a relatively rural area; there were still cows almost inside of the county courthouse area. Fairfax had already seen a very dramatic change. People tend to forget that in 1940, just before WWII, Fairfax County was the third largest milk-producing county in Virginia. WWII and the expansion of Washington and the Federal Government dramatically expanded the population of Northern Virginia and Fairfax. I believe the heavy suburban development came almost to the Providence District at that period. The growth was certainly at the Seven Corners area, which was developed very quickly. Beyond the region there were still rural enclaves and an incredible network of old timers who formed the real rural Virginia community.

Linda: In your opinion what have been the most significant changes in Fairfax County in the last 40 years?

Dr. Hawkes: Fairfax County, I think, has gone from becoming semi-rural since the beginning of the 20th century, earlier it was a very rural county, to a very urban county. Some people like to say it has become a 1980's suburb in search of a city. It has become a very distinct community

I believe Fairfax County has done the best job, as far as my knowledge as a historian, in gracefully and productively making a transition. Fairfax to be honest with you was a good dairy county but not particularly good farming land.

Fairfax County partly through very educated and involved citizens, along with a generally strong government and good government by both political parties, has enabled Fairfax County through planning, investing in the future, and thinking ahead to make one of the best transitions with the least growing pains and fewest big mistakes. A good example of the Fairfax County Government is through their efforts by the planning of future water and sewer needs; often-suburban areas attend to these matters, unfortunately only when it is a crisis. So the most significant change was becoming a large rural community to an extraordinarily diverse urban community while maintaining a sense of citizen involvement.

Fairfax has become one of the most ethnically diverse regions in the United States through strong; solid government, citizen awareness and participation. This

course of action means that Fairfax is right on the forefront of what America of the 21st and 22nd centuries are likely to be. We are the pioneers still, in a way.

Linda: How have higher educational opportunities changed in Northern Virginia since 1969?

Dr. Hawkes: They have changed tremendously. Northern Virginia in some ways has always been a stepchild of the State of Virginia. Having come from Southern Virginia and having been a Northern Virginian for many years, I bristle a little bit when I see the Virginia Welcome Station as you cross the Rappahannock River. Frankly I think it is long overdue that it belongs in a place over the Potomac River where you should be welcomed to Virginia.

Northern Virginia, which certainly is, has been and is the economic engine for the Commonwealth of Virginia, particularly for Fairfax County. In 1969 they had Marymount College, which was very good and had been founded earlier but had a very limited mission and back then Marymount was a 2 year private catholic girl's school. They performed their mission well but it was rather limited. After World War II, the University of Virginia and Virginia Tech and others had established extension centers in Northern Virginia, mostly for returning Veterans; and while those extension centers were very good they lacked full time faculty and the opportunity to complete degree programs. In 1957 through the pressure of citizens in Northern Virginia and through their own efforts, the University of Virginia had established a two-year branch college. Now given the population of the region at that time, the fact that there was so little state support for higher education and so little in the terms of the establishment of public higher education it was astonishing.

In 1966 thanks to Governor Godwin and others they established the statewide community college system. A small Fairfax Technical College, which had already been established, became the core of the Northern Virginian Community College (NVCC). This was probably one of the two or three best community colleges in the nation. I would rank NVCC with Miami Dade and others.

In the 1950's and 1960's things were rapidly changing and what makes it even more astonishing is that Virginia went through a very dark period in 1954 after the Brown decision. The dominant politicals' tried to foist a massive resistance,

which was a last political ditch towards racial integration within the state. Northern Virginia was not very cooperative. In 1957 the two-year branch of George Mason and in 1966 the community college was created at a time when many Virginians were saying that we needed to abolish higher education is remarkable to the kind of leadership that the Providence District and Fairfax had given the state. Due to their combined cooperation Northern Virginia Community College went to one of the largest community colleges in the US.

In 1966 George Mason College began a four-year program and in 1972, it separated from the University of Virginia to become a freestanding public university. At the same time George Mason greatly expanded its programs to accommodate students of different races and ages, at that time it was already co-ed in the 1970's, which was typical of Northern Virginia and Fairfax. George Mason had over 3,000 women over age 25 who were pursuing bachelor's degrees. These were often women who dropped out of college to start families, help their families sometimes during World War II or the Korean War and now while their children were in school they could come back and take classes. So I think it is the aggressive nature of Northern Virginians to seize opportunities to improve their lives.

People from this district who saw this as a place of opportunity, a place to get ahead drove the development of these intuitions. Marymount evolved nicely also, it became four-year, then co-ed and also added graduate programs. Virginia Tech also expanded their programs to include degrees. And the University of Virginia ultimately expanded its center, as well as Old Dominion, and other private institutions. So by the year 2007 the residents of the Providence District, within a 20-mile radius, have hundreds of degree programs.

Linda: As a historian why is it important to preserve a record of the history for the Providence District?

Dr. Hawkes: I think it is extraordinarily important. We are a rich, rich, place, it is frightening to know the numbers of people in the world who would like to come and share what the people of this district have built.

It is a place that is sought after by many, many individuals and because of our nature as a friendly, open people we have welcomed change. The Providence District has changed and become multi-ethnic. Most of those people or at least 99.9 % came here not to change but to become part and partners of its rich cultural educational and economic life. They want to join in and be part of it, the Providence District's success.

We succeed in America by diversity which creates thinking, challenge and inventiveness, but, we do it by buying into it and part of what people need and want to buy into is our heritage; who we are and where we came from. So, I think it is critically important in an age when many new people are coming into the district to know the Providence District heritage so they can in a real sense buy into that history. They themselves then can make the past meaningful to them as well, and can feel as though they are a part of a stream of things through change and development.

While I think that any of us at any time knowing our roots and knowing where our anchors are gives us our stability. Due to the rapid change in the Providence District, particularly our ethnic diversity this aids in making our history even more important and potentially more valuable.

Linda: Discuss the idea of change in American History and how that change has impacted us here in Fairfax County, Providence District and how that fits into the larger picture.

Dr. Hawkes: People are often distressed by change. Change can be disturbing. Most of us like stability, there is a certain comfort to keeping things the way they are, but change means life. When you stop changing you are dead so change is natural. As a historian I thought it useful to point out that America has always been a nation of change. The people who moved and lived in the Providence District in 1900 were shocked by change even though it did not occur rapidly or dramatically. In 1900 there was change through the economy and they had gone through the Civil War and ultimately the results were generations who saw unbelievable changes in their lifestyle. There were people who could never imagine a society that did not have slavery. Even though our citizens had learned slavery ended some could not accept it. Not only did we survive the Civil War and the end of slavery we eventually prospered and ultimately we were in a better

place because of it being gone. But for some it was very hard, even for some of the freed slaves. Some of the men and women from slavery, as happy as they were to be free it was also a dramatic change for them.

All throughout our history we have had change. Perhaps that change for the people in Northern Virginia prepared them for the literal shocks that came during and after World War II in which communities were dramatically changed overnight. I remember riding down Lee Highway and seeing the farm that had the huge statue with the dog listening to it masters voice and going down to the crab restaurant, those are endearing things in my memory, but like so many things in the Providence District they are gone and that is part of the memory and of who we are.

As America rapidly becomes multi-ethnic, and it will happen as all of the predictions have stated, Fairfax County and the Providence District can be an instructive example to the rest of America as to how you undergo change and how it can enrich you. This occurrence isn't necessarily bad and people should learn how rich relationships could be formed through this change. I believe that we in the Providence District and as Northern Virginians can be a model community, as ethnic change spreads across America.

When I travel across Southern Virginia one of the things that I noticed is the absence of the wonderfully ethnic restaurants. If I want to go to have a meal at a Thai or Afghan restaurant I would not know where to go, but in the Providence District you would not have to go far.

Linda: What in your opinion would be regarded as the important changes in the Providence District in the 20th century?

Dr. Hawkes: I think it will feel that it has become a very successful urbanized region in terms of keeping and building the quality of life. I believe that as Fairfax County and the Providence District became heavily populated they not only maintained but also improved the opportunities of public education. For example I think that Fairfax County has unparalleled public libraries and public school systems, some of the best literally in the world. I think Fairfax County has maintained a rich cultural and civic lifestyle; and it is obvious if you look at the vitality of the health and cultural organizations. And as I have already pointed out

we have been blessed with extraordinarily good government. Also we have good civic leaders from both political parties which have blessed and enriched this county. I think that the most important changes will be that Fairfax urbanized and improved the quality of its life and evolved not only as a satellite of Washington, DC but has become a place within its own right through its economic stability. The Providence District is a place where people not only have as a bedroom community but where people come to work as well in spite of being part of a huge metropolitan area of which we are proud. So even though the District of Columbia is the crown jewel of this region, Fairfax itself has a rich, vibrant economy within itself.

Linda: When you were talking about setting an example, I find that Supervisor Smyth, who is the Supervisor of Providence District at this time, is certainly doing that a lot with what is going on in this district. We have the Hunter Mill Road that has been declared a scenic highway, the new Oakton Library, which will be the first in our district, under its' current boundaries, we have a new park and saved a schoolhouse under her direction also. Would you talk about, in 10-year increments what you deem important nationally, as reflected in the Providence District? You have spoken about World War II, could you talk about its' local impact?

Dr. Hawkes: I think that almost everything nationally has impacted on Fairfax and the Providence District partly because we are really at the seat of empire for the world in the 20th century. A lot of people considered America the 20th century to be the American century. We were certainly an extraordinary nation going from being broken, divided with the Civil War hardly a nation, to by 1900 probably having the third largest Navy on earth, probably the largest industrial capacity, and then emerging on the world scene with World War I, the first time we sent troops off of the continent and sent them to Europe. So that America became a world player and those actions went both ways. World War I probably brought, ending in 1918, actually the peacemaking 1919 Versailles.

World War I brought the first army camps to the Providence District. It meant people from outside of the region coming here mixing with the people here disrupting the patterns of life and commerce and that type of thing. So that that event probably began the first major stirring in this district of new people, new events, outside forces, it was more going on than getting the cows milked.

The depression likewise hit Northern Virginia. Northern Virginians like everybody else had to survive one of the most severe tests of whether we could hold out as a democracy during economic crisis when many nations of the world turned to dictatorships, they turned to fascism, they turned to communism. We kept the faith and held the line and people in the Providence district suffered like everybody else.

World War II was perhaps in the 20th century the most dramatic change and that was when citizens everywhere had to pitch in through victory gardens, through rationing. But for the Washington area it meant the rapid dramatic expansion of the District of Columbia. So that it was like getting a punch right in the stomach for most northern Virginians, both good and bad, they whole heartedly supported the war effort but their lives would never be the same again.

Farms were sold, developments were built, troops were stationed and staying everywhere, people from the Pentagon had to find places to live, eat and literally it altered the economy. Many left the farms to go to work, or stayed on their farms yet had to work in nearby towns, many commuting into Washington; we would never be the same. It would mean two dramatic changes for women who would throw themselves whole-heartedly into the public sector to support the war. They would go to work in men's jobs so the role of women outside of the home would dramatically change forever. And the Post war economy and women coming home and having babies certainly changed and increased the population after the war. The federal activity did not shrink very quickly because the cold war came on and in effect we stayed in a state of mobilization. Because of the relationship, private contractors in the federal government found Fairfax and the Providence District a very attractive place to locate themselves whereby they would still be in a close proximity of their clients, which would be the federal government, so that would dramatically alter Northern Virginia.

Then the Korean War and Viet Nam took place and look at the number of refugees that came to Northern Virginia. It was really sad for Viet Nam it was as if you took their most educated and talented population and you harvested a large number of them in Fairfax County. It is like we got the cream of that nation's brainpower and it made a dramatic difference in this county. Today we are seeing an influx of many other nationalities, particularly the Latino community and the

Hispanics are becoming a large force as Northern Virginia still represents a place where you can come and work and make a good income and also have a very, very, rich quality of life. You can send your student, or kids off to public school and who knows, they can wind up in Harvard. So yes the changes, particularly in Northern Virginia, which holds a close proximity to the most powerful capital in the world, Washington, DC of which we are approximately 15 miles away. National and worldwide events impact on us occasionally and unfortunately like 911 but thank goodness we, as a whole, have been extremely fortunate.

Linda: How do you see our future progressing if you can speak after the year 2007.

Dr. Hawkes: I think it will continue to develop in terms of population and the population density will probably increase and the educational level will remain one of the highest in the world. The average person here has at least two years of college and there are very few places in the world where that exists. I also believe that will continue to shape the quality of civic involvement and the quality of our public schools, libraries and a lot of it will depend on how successfully we integrate ethnic change.

I believe that the leadership of the county like Supervisor Smyth is well aware of the change and she is conscious, as well as the other Supervisors, of the need to include those individuals equally. And I believe this project is one example of trying to give them a way to buy into who we are.

So I think the future of Northern Virginia and the Providence District is solid. I think a lot of it depends on us drawing on our own history of change where we managed it well and we planned for it. The future will depend on our continuing to do this and realize we are in the middle of something, not at the beginning and not at the end.

Linda: The first students, how have they changed over the years?

Dr. Hawkes: When I first attended George Mason there were 18 year old Caucasian boys and girls who could not get into James Madison, the University of Virginia or Virginia Tech so they came to George Mason to learn and prove themselves. Most of the students did and were very good. But, it was a little

teeny school for 18-year-old white boys and girls, but it since has reversed itself. The university in Fairfax County is one of the most diverse ethnically in the nation. In our student union we have documented over 80 languages spoken by the students in the student union as their first language. That in itself is amazing and what is equally amazing is the average age of students went from the 20's to somewhere now in the 30's. That is also equally true of the Northern Virginian Community College, probably now more so.

Northern Virginian citizens have realized that given the rapid change that education is a lifelong process right down to our senior learning institute, which is powerful, aggressive and very vigorous. In the classrooms at George Mason, Northern Virginia Community College and Marymount the quality standards have been very high. This is in part due to the variety of ages of students now attending college. Older students are sort of self-selective. When an older student attends our educational systems, in the ages of 30's thru the 50's they mean business. If the teacher or professor is not prepared or if they let the class out early, unlike the 18 year olds, they are very, very unhappy. Having taught a variety of students, I have found the mixed gender, ethnic, and age has improved the chemistry of the classes.

I have had several freshman classes, which I thought that this classroom would be improved if I had three or four senior citizens in here. They would be the salt in the recipe that would make it taste right. So the universities and schools here have gotten a lot of professors who taught as a sideline. These part time teachers were in Washington due to jobs in the government, industrial, or engineering fields. They enjoy teaching and they want to teach one course at night for the university. So that brings us some rich pool of individuals who are not available to some good universities located in rural areas. Virginia Tech, which is a good school but in a rural area, does not have the rich talent around it but it can draw from these individuals, such as we have.

Being in the Providence District is a plus for students due to the availability of internships which are very important so when you get that part time job, it can later become your career. If you are in an engineering school that is far away from the employment centers it is a little more difficult. Northern Virginia still offers some wonderful advantages for all ages and the senior citizens can come for free on an available space system. If you live in a very rural area you might

not be able to sit in on a social psychology course that might have fascinated you, but if you live in the Providence District you don't have to go far to sit in that course.

Linda: We also have learning and retirement in this area?

Dr. Hawkes: Yes wonderful, vigorous programs.

Linda: I believe they are called OLLI now?

Dr. Hawkes: Yes it is very good. I have taught in it and these individuals ask some incredibly tough questions. This type of OLLI program is just another example as to what makes Northern Virginia make a difference.

Linda: You mentioned Captain Pell's Crab House and the dog with the master's voice, are there any other things that strike you about Providence over the years?

Dr. Hawkes: Yes one thing that I loved is you and your family Mrs. Byrnes owned the drive in theaters, they were so much fun and you could put your windows down, put the speaker in the door, and go buy food. And I don't remember any other one that was in Northern Virginia when I was here. I think over on Rt. 50 there was an unusually good Tasty Freeze that I loved.

One of the things I think was wonderful that came here was the Merrifield Regional Post Office which had long hours and if you were like me you loved, and could buy all kinds of commemorative stamps. So there were a lot of things about the Providence District that I remember and loved. Now I believe that Supervisor Smyth getting the library will be another big, big plus for this district.

Linda: Yes actually, we have the grand opening of the Oakton Library on Saturday, September 29, 2007 at 10:00 am in the morning.

Dr. Hawkes: I think it is a wonderful thing. I understand you all worked very hard on this project and I believe that the many students in this area will use the library. I just love going into them so that is just a long needed, overdue plus for Providence District.

Linda: Thank you for your time, you brought up a lot of interesting topics, answered a lot of questions and brought everything together. I thank you again, it has been a pleasure.

Dr. Hawkes: I thank you and have a nice day.